



Leaves of Grass

by Alex Klein

In the earliest photographic images produced in the nineteenth century one finds a fondness for subjects that appear to meditate on the material properties and metaphoric implications of photography itself. Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre's plaster casts, for example, are themselves 'positive' impressions from 'negative' moulds. Likewise, *A Scene in a Library* by William Henry Fox Talbot points to photography's relationship to the book form, or his renderings of plants, literally photo-chemical machines

that convert carbon dioxide to sugar with the aid of sunlight. In this way, these early photographic images encode a kind of self-reflexivity that underscores the very conditions of the medium. Although the resulting compositions, often of static objects, were most likely determined by the conventions prescribed by classical still lifes and the technological constraints of lengthy exposure times, we might also interpret them as crucial, and prophetic, reflections on archivization, replication, and circulation. ›

Alongside these pioneering investigations stands Anna Atkins (1799–1871) and her cyanotype prints of algae, which inspire their own strand of ‘photo’-chemical inquiry and mark one of the earliest endeavours within photographic self-publishing. Photographic historian Larry J. Schaaf credits Atkins as both the first woman photographer and as the first person to print and publish a photographically illustrated book. Although Fox Talbot’s *Pencil of Nature* is often assumed to be the first mass-produced book of photographs, Atkins’ self-published *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* in fact predates Talbot’s iconic publication. Working in a domestic setting and often alongside her scientist father, Atkins wanted to create a detailed illustrated compendium to William Henry Harvey’s imageless 1841 *A Manual of the British Algae*. As Schaaf notes, unlike Talbot, whose primary agenda was to promote the wide dissemination of the photographic process and its application in book form, Atkins’ goal was to produce a comprehensive volume of reproducible images with the greatest veracity for the purpose of scientific study and general edification, all while maintaining a keen formal sensibility.

‘*Impressions*’ aptly describes the cyanotype process Atkins used, first developed by Sir John Herschel in 1842. Although cyanotypes failed to find a permanent place within botanical representation, their formal properties and relatively immediate effects had a great appeal to other disciplines, such as in engineering, where the cyanotype process was still popular until recently in the form of blueprints. Cyanotypes are similar to the method of making a photogram in a darkroom (we might be reminded here of James Welling’s *Flowers* series), and



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Apple Hills, installation with Granny Smith apples and a projector stand at Amsterdams Centrum voor Fotografie, 2010 © Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky

better known today not only for their use in architectural renderings, but as the commercially available Sunprints marketed to children. Perhaps as close as one can get to the early advertisements of ‘sun-drawn images,’ cyanotypes are produced by placing an object directly onto the surface of chemically coated paper, burning the image by exposing it to the sun, and subsequently ‘developing’ it in water. Because they are cameraless and negativeless photographs, each print is necessarily an original. Thus, Atkins’ book required that she carefully make repeated prints from her individual specimens resulting in both formal and physical variations in the imprints made from her fragile seaweed arrangements. Over the course of ten years Atkins produced at least twelve copies of *British Algae* in various states of finish. Completed in 1853 and comprised of handwritten plates, custom seaweed type, and as many as 400 unique cyanotype prints, the three volume set stands as a remarkable achievement.

Just two years later, in 1855, Walt Whitman (1819 – 1892) self-published his collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*,

a book that he would go on to revise and reprint throughout the course of his life. In addition to self-financing the first edition he also did much of the typesetting, having apprenticed for a printer in his youth and founded the newspaper the *Long Islander*, where he served as ‘publisher, editor, pressman, distributor and even provided home delivery.’ Intensely personal, *Leaves of Grass* elicits the lived experience of Americans during a pivotal moment in the formation of U.S. national identity and amid fundamental political and socioeconomic change. And yet the book is perhaps best remembered for its wholehearted embrace of the senses and unbridled enthusiasm for the natural world amidst the shift to an increasingly industrialized landscape. A modern text of its time, Whitman’s verse thus reflected a certain ambivalence towards the technological advances afoot, with Whitman warning in one passage: ‘Poet! Beware lest your poems are made in the spirit that comes from the study of pictures of things, [and not from] contact with real things themselves.’

Despite the scepticism of this statement, Whitman’s engagement with photo-

graphy was both intimate and profound, leaving behind dozens upon dozens of photographic portraits in which he posed both alone and with friends and rumoured lovers. Famously, the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* does not bear its author's name. Instead, Whitman included an engraved reproduction of a daguerreotype of himself, stating: 'The contents of the book form a daguerreotype of [my] inner being, and the title page bears a representation of its physical tabernacle.' Whitman continued to rework and republish *Leaves of Grass* throughout his life, and as Leo Braudy has noted, with each subsequent and expanded edition, 'Whitman's image often kept pace, getting older and presented often in tandem with a script-like signature, printed as if personally autographed,' thus making each edition appear to live and breathe along with its author.

It is precisely the personal involvement with the natural world embodied in both Atkins' and Whitman's engagement with photography and the book form that drives Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky to produce her most recent body of work, reproduced here as *39 Gräser*. For Kovacovsky, 1855 marks another important marker in the trajectory mapped so far with the publication of *Physiotypia Plantarum Austriacarum* by paleobotanist Constantin von Ettingshausen and botanist Alois Pokorny. This multi-volume publication depicts hundreds of plant specimens from the Austro-Hungarian territory using the *Naturselbstdruck* or nature printing process developed in Austria in 1850. The *Naturselbstdruck* process produced an image at the actual size of the plant material, however, with far greater detail than could have been hoped for in the cyanotype process. In addition to reproducing a specimen at actual size, this

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Horsetail, inkjet print & watercolour, 2009
© Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky

process allowed one to transfer the very surface onto paper by means of a press, which Kovacovsky describes as a kind of predecessor of scanning. Using what she considers a modern-day equivalent to these print-making processes, Kovacovsky employs a photocopy machine to scan her grass arrangements and output them as inkjet prints on standard, off-the-shelf A4 paper in ten different pastel hues. Kovacovsky revels in a kind of freedom bound by the constraints of the standardized page and replication process, and because the grasses are always placed at random and output on different colours, each print is necessarily unique despite the book's mass-produced materials.

Although Kovacovsky's project is situated squarely within the twenty-first century, the work channels the sensuous nature and exuberance of some of the nineteenth century projects examined so far. Always displayed in an intimate book or portfolio form, the work invites her viewers to become readers as they physically flip through the prints on differently coloured backgrounds, observing the interplay of natural forms from page to page. As with Atkins and Whitman, one

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